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ABSTRACT

Creating meaningful links between home and school is a particular concern of teachers and families. As classroom teachers, Betty Shockley and Barbara Michalove heard their students talk often about home literacy events. They wanted to find a way to learn what families valued and practiced, and they wanted to communicate to families how their children were becoming literate in school. By formulating a set of "parallel practices" (home reading journals, family stories, family reflection, and adult literacy conversations) sensitive to the needs and goals of both contexts, they developed respectful partnerships in support of young literacy learners. This instructional resource details the development of these "parallel practices" and features the voices and experiences of one mother and daughter as they participated in this jointly constructed opportunity through first and second grade. Contains 9 references, a bibliography of 28 works of children's literature, and 7 figures illustrating parallel practices and presenting excerpts of students' journal entries. (Author/RS)

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Creating Parallel Practices: A Home-to-School and School-to-Home Partnership

Betty Shockley Barbara Michalove JoBeth Allen

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Instructional Resource No. 13
Fall 1995

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National Reading Research Center

Creating Parallel Practices: A Home-to-School and School-to-Home Partnership

Betty Shockley
Barbara Michalove
Fowler Drive Elementary School, Athens, Georgia

JoBeth Allen
University of Georgia

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE NO. 13
Fall 1995

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318 Aderhold
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602-7125
(706) 542-3674 Fax: (706) 542-3678
INTERNET: NRRC@uga.cc.uga.edu

NRRC - University of Maryland College Park
3216 J. M. Patterson Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742
(301) 405-8035 Fax: (301) 314-9625
INTERNET: NRRC@umail.umd.edu

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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

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National Reading Research Center
318 Aderhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-7125
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National Reading Research Center
3216 J. M. Patterson Building
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About the Authors

Betty Shockley is a teacher with the Clarke County School District in Athens, Georgia. She is also a graduate student in Language Education and director of the NRRC's School Research Consortium. She has co-authored two books with JoBeth Allen and Barbara Michalove, *Engaging Children* and *Engaging Families*.

JoBeth Allen is a Professor in Language Education at the University of Georgia. She conducts collaborative research with teacher researchers in whole language classrooms, with a particular focus on the students teachers worry about the most.

Barbara Michalove is currently a fourth-grade teacher at Fourth Street Elementary School in Athens, Georgia.

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Betty Shockley
Barbara Michalove
Fowler Drive Elementary School, Athens, GA

JoBeth Allen
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Abstract. *Creating meaningful links between home and school is a particular concern of teachers and families. As classroom teachers, Betty Shockley and Barbara Michalove heard their students talk often about home literacy events. They wanted to find a way to learn what families valued and practiced, and they wanted to communicate to families how their children were becoming literate in school. By formulating a set of "parallel practices" sensitive to the needs and goals of both contexts, they developed respectful partnerships in support of young literacy learners. This instructional resource details the development of these "parallel practices" and features the voices and experiences of one mother and daughter as they participated in this jointly constructed opportunity through first and second grade.*

Nancie Atwell, a widely-published teacher researcher, is also a parent. She wrote about what she and her husband Toby wish for their daughter Anne:

> We hope for a teacher who will understand writing, reading, and Anne: someone who will observe what she knows and needs to know next, how she learns, and what she loves, someone who will speak to us of our daughter's literacy with passion and insight, someone so thoughtful about teaching and learning that when we visit Anne's classroom, there isn't a program in sight. We dream of the thoughtful practices of a teacher researcher. (Atwell, 1991, p. 16)

We, like Nancie and Toby, have dreamed this dream for our own children. We have rejoiced in every teacher who has taken a personal interest in our children. Each of us strives to be this kind of teacher, but we know we cannot do it well without the children's first teachers, their parents.

Betty and Barbara base their instructional decisions on principles of meaningfulness, time, choice, community, responsibility, and social interaction. Children in their classrooms choose what they read, what they write about, what investigations they conduct, with whom they learn, and many other aspects of self-regulated, experiential learning, elements that typify much of children's out-of-school learning. However, they wanted to create a closer link between children's home lives and school lives. Along with this interest was a dissatisfaction with their previous use of "homework," which had varied from none to occasional

At School	Parallel Practices	At Home
	Tell Me About Your Child	
		parents inform teachers
	Home Reading Journals	
we read everyday child chooses book we talk about books wrote what they chose		they read every night child chooses book they talk about books wrote what they chose
	Family Stories	
told family stories ("Y'all know what?") wrote family stories wrote memorable event		told family stories wrote family stories parents wrote about own childhood
	Family Reflection	
children reflected on how they learned to read and write child wrote evaluation of first grade child wrote expectation for second grade		families reflected on how their children learned to read and write parent wrote evaluation of first grade parent wrote expectation for second grade
	Adult Literacy Conversation	
	parents and teachers met to talk about books and children	

Figure 1. Parallel Practices

practice work that children could do independently. One of the first concerns parents have each year is homework. First graders and their parents think of homework as a milestone in their school experience and are excited to take home this marker of "real" school; predictably, however, that excitement usually lasts about a week. Betty and Barbara wanted to create homework that could sustain the interest of students, parents, and teachers all year long. The children's days in the classroom were filled with meaningful, relational literacy experiences. Could the experiences of home become integrated into the classroom community in a way that would complement both contexts?

In their ground-breaking book *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discussed what they

came to view as distinctly different ways of accessing knowledge: *separate knowers* and *connected knowers*. According to their research, "Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for empathy" (p.113). These connected knowers' ". . .purpose is not to judge but to understand" (p.116). As connected teachers, Betty and Barbara sought to understand, to connect with, both students and families. They trusted their students' thinking and encouraged them to expand it.

In response to her concerns and in recognition of her beliefs, Betty developed a set of parallel experiences to link home and school (see Figure 1). Barbara strengthened the connection by continuing with the same group, adapting the practices based on feedback from parents and students. They also decided to study the process, and invited their long-time co-researcher, JoBeth, to participate. Parents became partners in the inquiry as they communicated with Betty and Barbara in home journals and monthly meetings.

Parallel Practices

Tell Me About Your Child

Each teacher issued an open-ended invitation to parents at the beginning of the year, similar to letters written by New York teachers in Calkins' (1991) *Living Between the Lines*. Betty wrote, "Hello! Welcome to first grade! Parents have homework first! Please write and tell me about your child." Barbara wrote, "Dear Parents, It's always exciting to start a new school year with a new group of students. I look forward to working with your child. Please take a few moments to tell me about your child. Thanks, Barbara Michalove." Every parent, both years, wrote back. They shared how very special each child was in his/her family. They shared tips ("Torry's confidence in himself is not the greatest. However, he will overcome this with love and attention") and talents ("Ashley can find anything around the house and make it into something beautiful and interesting"), information about illnesses and family situations, and most of all the love they have for these special children.

Home Reading Journals

Reading together and talking about books was the heart of the "homework" Betty and Barbara designed. Families somehow, amid incredible schedules, hardships, celebrations, and the everyday hassle of life, found time to enjoy literature together. As one child told Betty, "My mom read part of the first chapter of *Little House [on the Prairie]* while I was taking a bath. Yeah, I was in the tub and she was sitting on the toilet—the lid was down—and reading to me."

Just as they chose what books they would read at school, children chose books from the classroom library to take home with them each night. Three school nights each week in first grade, and two nights in second grade, children and families had homework. The families were encouraged through a letter (see Figure 2) to spend time together reading, talking, and writing about books. The child could read, or

HOMEWORK. . .In our class, reading and writing are viewed as very connected and natural skills to learn. We read many books each day and write like real writers every day. Our homework practices also reflect this style of learning. Each night (except Friday) your child will bring a book and a reading journal home. Later in the year there will also be some spelling homework. For now, please read WITH your child every night. Remember, your child will be choosing the book s/he takes home, so on occasion the book may be too difficult for your child to read independently. You can help by asking your child if s/he wants to read the book him/herself or if s/he'd rather you read it to him/her. Then, use the journal to write down his/her responses to the reading. Sometimes YOU may want to write me about the selection yourself and model for your child ways to think about what we read, or sometimes you may want to have your child dictate to you his/her interpretations, or sometimes your child may want to do it all by him/herself. What I'm trying to say is, relax—enjoy this time together—there's no one right way.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Parent Letter

another family member could read to the child, or they could read together; each family developed its own pattern, which evolved based on the needs of each participant. Then they were encouraged to engage in a natural conversation about the book and to record their response to the book in a journal.

The journal was a spiral notebook, inexpensive and easily replaced when full. The book and the journal traveled back and forth in a zip-top plastic bag. Betty and Barbara read journals during their half-hour planning period and responded to each individually. Some of the responses were only a sentence or two and others were quite lengthy, but the personal responses were very important to children and other family members. LaToya's mother told Betty, "She comes home with the journal and starts asking me, 'What did she say? What did she say?'" Adam's mom remarked, "When you write those notes back, everybody runs to see what you said to them!"

Each family developed its own uses for the journal, including talking about books, illustrating, sharing information about the child's literacy development, occasionally conducting business, and sharing concerns (see Shockley, 1993, and Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, for a discussion of these uses). We did not provide initial models of how to respond, nor did we have a particular academic agenda for our responses; rather, we wanted each family to construct a functional format and ways of conversing that were personally meaningful. Likewise, we wanted our writing to be responsive to the issues and ideas the families raised. Moll and colleagues (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) pointed to "reciprocity" between families and school as a critical element in establishing enduring relationships. Our relationships with each family grew with every journal exchange. According to Moll et al. (1992), ". . .reciprocal practices establish serious obligations based on the

assumption of mutual trust, which is reestablished or confirmed with each exchange, and leads to the development of long-term relationships" (p.134). When this kind of shared practice is present, ". . . children have ample opportunities to participate in activities with people they trust."

Oral and Written Family Stories

Betty had a storytelling time every day, a dependable opportunity for children to bring their home lives to school. She provided a storytelling stool and a battery-operated microphone, and the kids did the rest. A first-day volunteer, Kimberly, perched on the stool, legs swinging, shy but excited about a story she had to share. "Y'all know what?" she opened, and the group instinctively came to attention and chorused, "What?" On the second day, she used the same "call to story," and a year-long routine was born, copied from that day forth by every storyteller, including Ms. Shockley. Peterson (1992) described this kind of established and comfortable practice as a community ritual. "Ritual is a way of connecting to a larger community. It is more than talk. It is made up of symbolic acts that ground family and community life" (p. 221). Everyone knew there would be a time each morning to bring their homes to school through story and that a simple question could set in motion events that would become a part of that community's day and year as shared texts. Ritualistic calls to story and storytelling routines are a part of many cultures. As Belenky et al. (1986) noted, "The connected class provides a culture for growth—as Elbow (1973) says, a 'yogurt' class, as opposed to a 'movie' class (in which students are spectators)" (p. 221).

"Y'all know what" was a morning routine that was both predictable and surprising. The children could count on being able to narrate their lives in the presence of a caring community, but often even the tellers were surprised by the responses they received. Rick told "fantastic" stories. Once, recounting an adventure at his apartment complex pool, it became obvious to all of us that he was telling some "whoppers." After he told about jumping off his roof into the water, we talked about how sometimes it was fun and interesting to embellish stories, making the ordinary seem grander, and that there were books in the classroom in which other storytellers had chosen to do the same thing. The name for that kind of storytelling was tall tales. After several other children attempted to cast their experiences on the same exaggerated scale as Rick's, we read some tall tales and after lunch saw a video of *Pecos Bill*. Learning to touch reality with the fantastic became a goal for many of these young writers.

All families tell stories; some mundane, some historical, some to define themselves as a family. The children in both classrooms wrote every day in writing workshop (Calkins, 1991), again often sharing stories of their lives. It seemed another natural extension to ask parents to contribute a family story. They had already shown their willingness to be participants, since they had authored pieces telling about their children at the beginning of the year and had consistently been partners in dialogue with Betty in the response journals. Betty issued an open invitation to write and

share a family story with the class and to have contributions included in a class book that would be available for the students to read as often as they would like. The invitation was open ended, and each family wrote something different, from narratives about marriage, birth, death, and religion to poetry and family sayings ("If you kill a frog you will stump your toe").

By second grade, the children were confident about their families' desire and ability to participate. After a class discussion they decided unanimously that they wanted their parents to write about their own childhoods. Both child and parent (or other family member) contributed to this themed issue of *Stories from Our Lives* (1992). Ashley wrote about being attacked by a bulldog, while her mother reminisced about a tire swing in the family oak tree. Greg wrote about a ride at Disneyland; his aunt wrote about moving from California to Georgia. Barbara shared a Hanukkah memory, and Frances Ward, the instructional aide, told of swallowing a marble as her mother quilted nearby.

Lakendra reminded us that readers and writers need an audience when she said, "I love them when they listen to me." Both classes published their family stories, and the children spent many days reading about each others' families and seeing in a concrete and shared way that even moms and dads, aunts and grandparents experience, need, and use story. By modeling their lives and their efforts for the children, they added to the literate legacies of both their home and school communities. We can only wonder at the family scenes when the writing was in progress. Was there laughter in the remembering, worry over the rendering in print, discussions about spelling, grammar?

Betty invited these authors to a book reading and signing, which children and parents enjoyed immensely. Parents also read or had someone else read their second-year stories at one of the parent meetings. The literate community was indeed expanding.

Learning Albums: Family, Child, Teacher Reflections

Reflecting on their own growth as readers and writers is arguably the most important form of evaluation for learners (Hansen, 1989). Evaluation by close members of their literate community provides a valuable second lens. At the end of each year, Betty (Figure 3) and Barbara (Figure 4) asked children and parents to reflect on the children's literacy learning in a set of parallel questions. Parents wrote at home, and were asked not to ask their children's opinion until after they gave their own; children wrote their reflections in school, where teachers could discuss responses with them.

Through this process, children had the opportunity to think about themselves as readers and writers; parents reflected on their children's development and on their expectations for the coming year; and Betty and Barbara gained valuable insights about children, families, and their own teaching. From reading the first-grade reflections, Barbara learned that most of the children and parents valued the reading/writing homework, so she decided to incorporate it into her own parallel practices. She also began the year with

Parent Homework #1	Student Reflection
Can your child read? Does your child seem to enjoy reading? How did your child learn to read? (Please answer these questions based on what you think. Don't ask your child.)	Can you read? Do you like to read? How did you learn to read? How would you help someone else learn to read? What were some of your favorite books you read this year?
Parent Homework #2	**Student Reflection**
Can your child write? Does your child like to write? How do you think your child learned to write? What do good first-grade writers know how to do?	Can you write? Do you like to write? How did you learn to write? How would you help someone else learn to write?
Parent Homework #3	**Student Reflection**
Tell me about your child now that he/she has finished first grade— What's his/her outlook on learning? How does she/he feel about school? Was first grade a good experience? What would you like his/her second-grade teacher to do for your child next year? Are there things you hope to see continued? Things that you hope will be done differently? Do you have any advice?	What did you like about first grade? What didn't you like about first grade? What do you hope second grade will be like?

Figure 3. First Grade End-of-Year Reflections

a good sense of what the children thought about themselves as readers and writers.

Barbara learned from the children that the only thing they didn't like about first grade was "time out" for disruptive behavior, a practice she also employed. So when the next year began, she told the students she had read their concerns and that this year there would be no time out. They would decide on the rules together, have a conference with Ms. Michalove or Ms. Ward to discuss the problem, and they would come up with a plan for the future. There were a few times during the year when a short cooling-off period in another classroom seemed necessary for a student; but for the most part, class meetings and individual counseling sessions proved very successful.

The student and parent end-of-year reflections were a collection of learning "snapshots" we gathered throughout the two years of the study. These portraits of individual growth and change were catalogued in individual student notebooks, creating Learning Albums that informed both teachers and parents. The

Parent Homework #1	**Student Reflection**
Does your child seem to enjoy reading? Does your child choose to read? How do *you* think your child has developed this year as a reader?	Do you like to read? How did you get to be a better reader? How would you help someone else learn to read?
Parent Homework #2	**Student Reflection**
Does your child like to write? Does your child choose to write at home? How do *you* think your child has developed as a writer this year? What do good second-grade writers know how to do?	Do you like to write? How did you get to be a better writer? How would you help someone else learn to write?
Parent Homework #3	**Student Reflection**
Tell me about your child now that he/she has finished second grade— What's his/her outlook on learning? How does he/she feel about school? Was second grade a good experience? What were some highlights of second grade for your child? What would you like his/her third-grade teacher to do for your child next year? Are there things you hope to see continued? Things you hope will be done differently? Do you have any advice?	What did you like about second grade? What didn't you like about second grade? What hopes do you have about third grade?

Figure 4. Second Grade End-of-Year Reflections

contributing "photographers" were from both home and school, creating different backdrops and perspectives. In the albums, Betty and Barbara chronicled the literate development of the students in a variety of poses, compositions, and time frames.

Learning Albums, the collection of assessments, information, and reflection, were not portfolios (the children did not design or use them) but were a way for us to observe, study, and share growth over time. Included in the Learning Albums were the *student-parent reflections*, the *"Tell me about your child"* letters, and photocopies of the *response journals*. Parents also participated as co-evaluators: Betty sent *home questions* about areas of learning that had been addressed during specific units in science. Parents first explored answers with their child at home, allowing Betty to clarify any confusions through personalized teacher-child conversations the next school day. In addition, there were representative

samples of student writings on self-selected topics as well as writings in which the students were asked to respond to a given topic for a prescribed amount of time. The three examples (beginning, middle, and end-of-year check points) of this standardized sampling were collected over the school year, and visually (by length) and contextually (through story development) represented for teachers and parents student growth as writers.

Sharing *Informal Reading Inventories* (IRI) with parents during conferences also offered a quick visual path to understanding. These inventories were also done at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. We *graphed word recognition* to show at a glance the growth patterns of individual learners; mapped graphically with Marie Clay's timed 10-min *word writing task*, an individualized picture of word-level reading progress began to come into focus. We *annotated the IRIs* regarding understanding of various kinds of texts, reading mannerisms, and specific reading strategies. Response journals, of course, added to the emerging literary profile of each child. Through our three-way partnership, all partners were able to contribute to and learn from these "big picture" albums of growth.

Parent Meetings: Adult Literacy Conversations

We invited the group of second-grade parents and other caretakers, whose children were going into their second year together, to meet with us throughout the year. We wanted to learn from the families what they thought was important about literacy and schooling, and we wanted them to have a forum for making decisions about their children's school year. Parents decided that the school was the most convenient meeting location and that free child-care was a must. We hired Ms. Elder (the instructional aide who worked with Betty) and her daughters (Thomasina and Simone) to provide this service.

We held seven meetings during the year. At the first, on September 3, eight mothers, four fathers, and assorted students and siblings (this was before we set up child-care) gathered in Barbara's room from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. Betty read an article that she had written about the home journals and family stories from the previous year (Shockley, 1993) to ask for feedback before it was published; each family was represented somewhere in the article, using their real names (at their request). She got applause, misty eyes, and a letter from Brandon's mother (see p. 11) that made its way into the article. Betty then passed the torch (and the children) to Barbara, who led parents in a discussion of how they wanted to structure the "homework" this year. They were very enthusiastic about this opportunity to "do things together," "interact," "communicate with the teacher all the time, not just at conferences," and to structure time together during their busy lives. They decided to keep the format the same, but to write in the journals two nights a week rather than three, with children still reading and discussing books with their parents on the other nights.

Barbara explained that the class had generated a list of what the kids wanted to learn and do during the year; this would become a major part of their curriculum. The list included

going camping, hiking, and fishing; studying Australia; going on a dinosaur dig; learning about various animals; going to the zoo and a ballet; visiting the Coca-Cola factory; and so forth. Parents then gave their own interests and ideas, including studying geography, going on the camping trip, and "going to Australia—take me too!" Eight parents did attend all or part of the class campout in October.

The next parent meeting focused on family memories. Betty read excerpts from several books that told family stories, including *The Hundred Penny Box* by Sharon Bell Mathis, and invited parents to share their memories. Parents and teachers talked, laughed, and remembered. This discussion led many parents into their contribution to the *Stories of Our Lives*, which they wrote over the next few weeks.

In December, about half the parents gathered to assemble these stories into books. We sewed pages together, then glued them into "marbleized" covers the children had made using oil paints and water on glossy paper over cardboard. As we worked, some parents shared the stories they had written; most asked that Betty or Barbara read them aloud, which they did.

At the February meeting, we shared books. Four of the eight parents and the three of us brought adult books we had been reading and briefly shared them. Then Barbara remarked on how many of the children in class were making the transition to short chapter books, and others would be following soon. She book-talked about a dozen books in this category, including popular mysteries, the *Box Car Children* series (e.g., Warner, 1989) and the *Stories Julian Tells* series (e.g., Cameron, 1981).

Parents had each gotten a copy of Betty's published article. Brian's mom, Pam, said, "I was so excited about the family stories and our little excerpts from the article—I *had* to talk to someone, so I called my relatives. I almost cried when I read Brandon's mom saying she finally realized she's a good mom." Others said they often reread the article and shared it with friends. We issued an invitation to present with us at the Children's Literature Conference, and three mothers indicated an interest (Colin's mom did present with us).

As we were leaving that night, Greg's Aunt Debra, newly stationed in Athens and new to motherhood, showed us that our hope of creating an extended community was becoming a reality. "You know what would be really fun?" she began. "An overnight campout for *us*, not the kids, just us women. Build a fire, drink hot chocolate, and just talk. . . ."

At our May meeting, we asked parents to share their thoughts about this year and their hopes for next year. They talked about having the kids stay together as a group; parents thought it had been beneficial, that the children had gotten to know each other "like brothers and sisters" and had learned how to work together. Everyone mentioned how much they enjoyed the books, whether they read them or their children read them. Parents talked in very specific ways about how much their children had grown as both readers and writers. In thinking about third grade, they wanted to continue the reading, and they wanted their children to continue to have a voice in creating the curriculum and to have fun with their learning.

The last event of the year was a family picnic at a city park, with 14 of 18 families attending. The year had come full circle; once again, the children, parents, siblings, and teachers were together.

Parental Approval

"Parental Approval" is not a signed permission form. For us, it came about through a yearlong process of oral and written dialogue.

At the end of the second-grade year, during the May parent meeting, we asked family members to talk about what difference, if any, these home-school experiences had made. Much of the conversation centered around the journals. Kate said, "I think it's a very good start, you know, to start that early, to be able to say that—okay, things are going on with me and I'm going to write them down here and I can kinda see what's going on, you know, thinking and seeing it on paper. . . ." Debbie added that it gave her a way to watch Adrian grow: "Their thinking grows from the beginning of the school year, the way they were writing and to where they are putting their concepts together. . .I saw a major difference even from the beginning of this school year—he's really wanting to think about what he's saying instead of copying it directly from the book. . . ."

Another mother pointed out that what really kept her daughter interested was "a response from the teacher." They were most appreciative of the time Betty and Barbara spent responding in a personal, positive way to each entry. "It wasn't just 'you did good,' you know, 'keep up the good work.'" They also liked having the communication channel with the teacher. Susan, whose daughter, Cathy, was in the class, told Barbara, "I really feel closer to you as a teacher than I did when Charlie [my son] was in [your room]. . .we kinda feel like family." Debbie agreed, "You're human now. [Before] we only saw you as a teacher."

These family members said that the opportunities to be actively involved with their children's reading and writing, and with their children's teachers, were very important to them; but nobody said it better than Brandon's mother, Kathryn:

> Ms. Shockley,
>
> When you said that we were a "special group because of the 100% participation", I felt proud but at the same time a little shocked and a little sad.
>
> When I grew up, it was hard for me to get my parents to participate in anything I did in school. That really affected my sense of "worth". I thought I was a burden to my parents. Also, I wasn't really excited about school. I felt if my parents didn't care, why should I? That is why I take the time out with Brandon in helping him with his school work. I want him to get excited about homework.
>
> I was so glad for the "homework". It gave me the opportunity to be in the "scholastic" part of his learning. I can appreciate it and I feel that it has helped Brandon's learning. I remember when the journals first started I would read to Brandon. Towards the end Brandon read to me. He was eager to learn more words so that he could read more, so he learned!

> I think my child is special. I have only one time to raise him and one time to teach him and one time to be a part of his growing up. If I show I care, then maybe he would be that caring parent also.
>
> Kathryn Eberhart

Case Study: Lakendra

Lakendra and her mother offer a specific translation of how these parallel practices brought home and school a little closer. From the very beginning when Janice wrote about her child, Lakendra, the hope and strength of this mother-daughter relationship was apparent:

> Lakendra Echols is very witty. She likes to go to movies, and she like to go to the mall especially the toy store. And most of all she likes to help with the house work. Washing dishes the most. Lakendra like to be my big girl; she's very out-spoken about what's she feel. Me and Lakendra have no secrets from each other. I can trust my big girl and she can count on me. She's my little star.

As this initial sharing gained dimension through journal exchanges, it became obvious that Lakendra's mother took her role as parent seriously yet softly. She was always there ready to share her insights, consider new ideas, and support us all as we journeyed down a winding road to literacy. Janice saw herself as a teacher, too, and rightfully so, but she was also ready and willing to be a learner—a stance we found was important for all of us.

Joint Construction of Support

The first day in first grade that the journals went home, Janice and Lakendra used it for recording lists of words. This made perfect sense given that the tablets Betty gave the students were clearly labeled by the manufacturer as being spelling tablets. No school-assigned spelling words had accompanied the journal home but that didn't stop this duo. They dutifully reported on page 1: "These are some of the words me and Lakendra are studying." After Betty talked briefly with Lakendra the next morning about other ways the journal might be used, she and her mom established a lasting partnership with each other, their teachers, and books.

So, was that all it took? Books, a child, people who cared, a way to communicate? You would think that with such a simple recipe, the end result would be fairly predictable. Not so. Each family/child/teacher partnership evolved differently, developing unique response patterns that suited their particular needs and comfort levels. For instance, the journals coauthored by Janice, Lakendra, Betty, and Barbara are unlike any others; they are examples of a special reporting style that was initiated by Janice in support of her daughter's literacy development and was respected by Betty and Barbara. Lakendra and her mother and teachers spent two years building literary bridges that really counted for something. We helped each other notice things. We gave each other a pat on the back. We really cared.

By the second day of journal writing, a style was born. Janice settled into a pattern of reporting that continued to be reliable over time. She shared her observations of the successes and struggles that she and Lakendra experienced as they blended their knowledge about reading and writing with those of the classroom teachers. Her very active and reflective role in supporting Lakendra's progress provided an interactive sounding board for ideas to be exchanged, considered, and reconsidered. Sometimes we would all agree. Sometimes either Janice or the classroom teacher would offer some additional information on an issue. In either case, there was trust and respect and encouragement for everyone's efforts.

Betty and Barbara tried to match their response styles to those initiated by the families, consciously accepting and supporting the family's form and content. Janice and Lakendra designed their response journals to express the meaningfulness of the effort, their relationship, and Janice's pride in her daughter. Early in first grade, Janice wrote:

> Ms. Shockley,
>
> Lakendra chose Old MacDonald as her reading for last night. She started out singing the song Old MacDonald until I sit down with her and pointed it out word for word but she did good.

Betty, just learning herself what kind of support Lakendra needed, responded with a suggestion:

> You may want to let Lakendra do the book her way first, then together you could get her to point *with* you to the words as you reread the story.

It wasn't long before Janice shared another idea with Betty by asking her opinion about getting longer books.

Janice: In the story *I Can Fly*, Lakendra did very good. Her reading was very good. And maybe she's ready to move on to a few more words. I mean a book with a few more words. If you think so also. (9/30/91)

Betty: I agree. She can read more difficult books; but like everybody, young readers enjoy reading things that are easy for them too.

Betty supported her suggestion both in the journal and by helping Lakendra find books with "a few more words." And so they continued day by day, exploring together the possibilities of the reading process.

Janice: Ms. Shockley, In the story of the Halloween Performance, Lakendra seem to have some problems with many of the words. Maybe she get a story with too many difficult words for her right now. But still I enjoyed her reading. Thank You. Janice Barnett (10/2/91)

Betty: This is probably an example of one of those times Lakendra chose a book that it would be best for you just to read to her. When you get ready to read together each night, you might begin by asking Lakendra—Do you want to read your book to me or do you want me to read to you? Sometimes after you read even a more difficult book, she may ask to read it after you. Let her be the leader. One of

the most important things about sharing books together is talking about them together. Thanks.

Janice: Lakendra was very excited about the books she chose to read to me. So excited she read them over and over again. And I was so pleased. Maybe last night she did want me to read the story to her I don't know but I will ask her from now on. Because she was a little upset that she didn't know a lot of the words. And I don't ever want her to feel pressured. Thanks. Janice Barnett (10/3/91)

Later that first-grade year, Mom wrote:

Janice: Ms. Shockley, I'm glad to see Lakendra is getting stories with a little more words and I can see she really tries even if she can't get them all right the words I mean. In the story *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* she read the story but she didn't know all the words but at least she tried and when she finished I read her the story again and I think she really enjoyed it a little better. Thanks. Janice B.

Betty: I wonder how it would be if when she brings home a book that is a little too hard, you read it first and then let her try it. Let me know how that way works compared to her reading first. Thanks!

Janice: Ms. Shockley, Now that's a good idea I never thought of that but I will try it. In the story the *Big Toe* Lakendra did good and I enjoyed it the story left both of us asking the question of who's big toe was it? Thanks. Janice B.

At one point in first grade, Janice raised a concern about sequencing. It was in response to Lakendra's reading of *Chicken Soup with Rice*. Since the "sequence" of that story was dependent on an understanding of the twelve months of the year, Betty did not pursue the issue in depth in her response; questions related to understanding texts did not appear again in the journal that year. Lakendra's end of first-grade Informal Reading Inventory showed her reading at a 90% accuracy rate on a passage from an Arnold Lobel *Frog and Toad* book and a 95% reading from a 1.2-level basal selection, with acceptable comprehension of both samples. However, Betty had noted in Lakendra's assessment notebook that she was having some difficulty making sense in her writing. But it was not until both home and school acknowledged the same lingering worry that the issue came out on the table. Then, Janice and Barbara were able to work together to help Lakendra's processing of ideas.

The first month of second grade Janice wrote, "She tries to read so fast when she reads to me just like a speed demon." Soon after, she reported:

Janice: Ms. Michalove, Lakendra read me the story *Amelia Bedelia Goes Camping* and she did a great job reading after she finished oh and by the way we stopped off at page 24. Then I asked her some questions about the story but she had to think about it before she answered. Lakendra can read the words but when it comes to asking question it looks like she has a hard time. We're

going to work together every night until we get it right. Thanks. Janice B.

And work together they did. Originally, there had been a focus at home on the word level of reading development. Being a good reader from Janice's point of view meant being able to read words; but as Lakendra grew more skilled at word recognition and her oral reading became more fluent, Janice shifted her focus. The process of becoming a "good reader" expanded to include comprehension. Barbara began to focus her interactions with Lakendra's reading on comprehension, knowing she would find support at home. Throughout second grade, Janice reported to Barbara on their continued efforts to address Lakendra's understanding of what she was reading.

Janice: Ms. Michalove, Lakendra read the story of *Magic Secrets* (Make a pencil disappear) She can read the words real good. but it is so hard for her to tell me what she read. I really don't know what to do now. If you have any suggestions of what I can do next I am willing to listen. (12/14/92)

Barbara: Janice—Maybe try reading her stories and then discussing them together. Perhaps she is concentrating so hard on reading the words that she can't comprehend the whole story. Let me know if this helps—Thanks for being concerned and helping Lakendra. She's lucky to have a mom who cares! Ms. M.

Janice: Ms. Michalove, Lakendra brought the book home *Come One Come All* and she chose the story of *Curious George Gets A Medal* and she wanted someone to read it to her and I started and my neice wanted to finish the story. She read it and then she asked Lakendra some question about the story and Lakendra answered the question very good. Thanks. Janice B. (1/7/93)

Janice: Ms. Michalove, Lakendra read the story of *Alligator Shoes* and she very good with it. Lakendra concentrates on the words so hard til she can't explains what she read but I'm working with her on her sequence and I hope we will get it after awhile. Thanks. Janice B. (3/18/93)

Janice: . . .Lakendra did read well with the story we had a long detailed discussion about the story. Lakendra seems to be caughting on a little with sequence. I proud to know that she is working so hard on it. Thanks. Janice B. (4/26/93)

Mother and teachers conferred and collaborated on other decisions about the best way to help Lakendra's literacy development. By the end of first grade, Lakendra had made strong progress as a reader, and Betty and Janice did not feel that continued Chapter I reading support would be necessary for her in second grade. Barbara agreed at the beginning of second grade; however, Janice's lingering concerns prompted a reconsideration of this decision. After sharing insights about Lakendra's comprehension, they agreed Lakendra would try working with a whole language Chapter 1 teacher who could provide additional support. Lakendra's mother's input had a

direct influence on school decisions regarding her daughter.

Growth in Home and School Literacy Communities

Lakendra also had a say in the journal writing. As with all the children, teachers and parents changed to meet the changing needs and abilities of the child. On April 13 in first grade, Janice, trying to figure out what would be most helpful to her daughter as Lakendra developed increasing expertise, wrote:

> Ms. Shockley, Lakendra has been worrying me to death about writing in her journal after she reads the story and I let her I hope it's o.k. In the story of *Star the Horse* she did very well and I'm glad to see her still making progress in her reading. Thanks. Janice B.

The grown-ups agreed that Lakendra was indeed ready to take over much of the journal writing. Lakendra commented on her opinion of books, and often included dialogue of the "do you like it/yes I do" variety; she sometimes reinforced her reviews with the authoritative stance, "seard Lakendra" [said Lakendra]. One interesting and diverse response was when she reported that she liked the story but "my mom do not." That showed us (1) that mother and daughter discussed the stories, regardless of who wrote the response, and (2) that Lakendra understood that people can have different opinions about books.

In addition to her intimate home reading community, Lakendra was an active member of the classroom community. She demonstrated her membership in several ways. She recognized that readers share books and responses within a reading community, as this April, first-grade entry reveals:

> Ms. Shockley
> *Good Night Moon*
> was a very good
> Book This Book is Terrific
> That Renee took
> home I Bet She like
> it too.

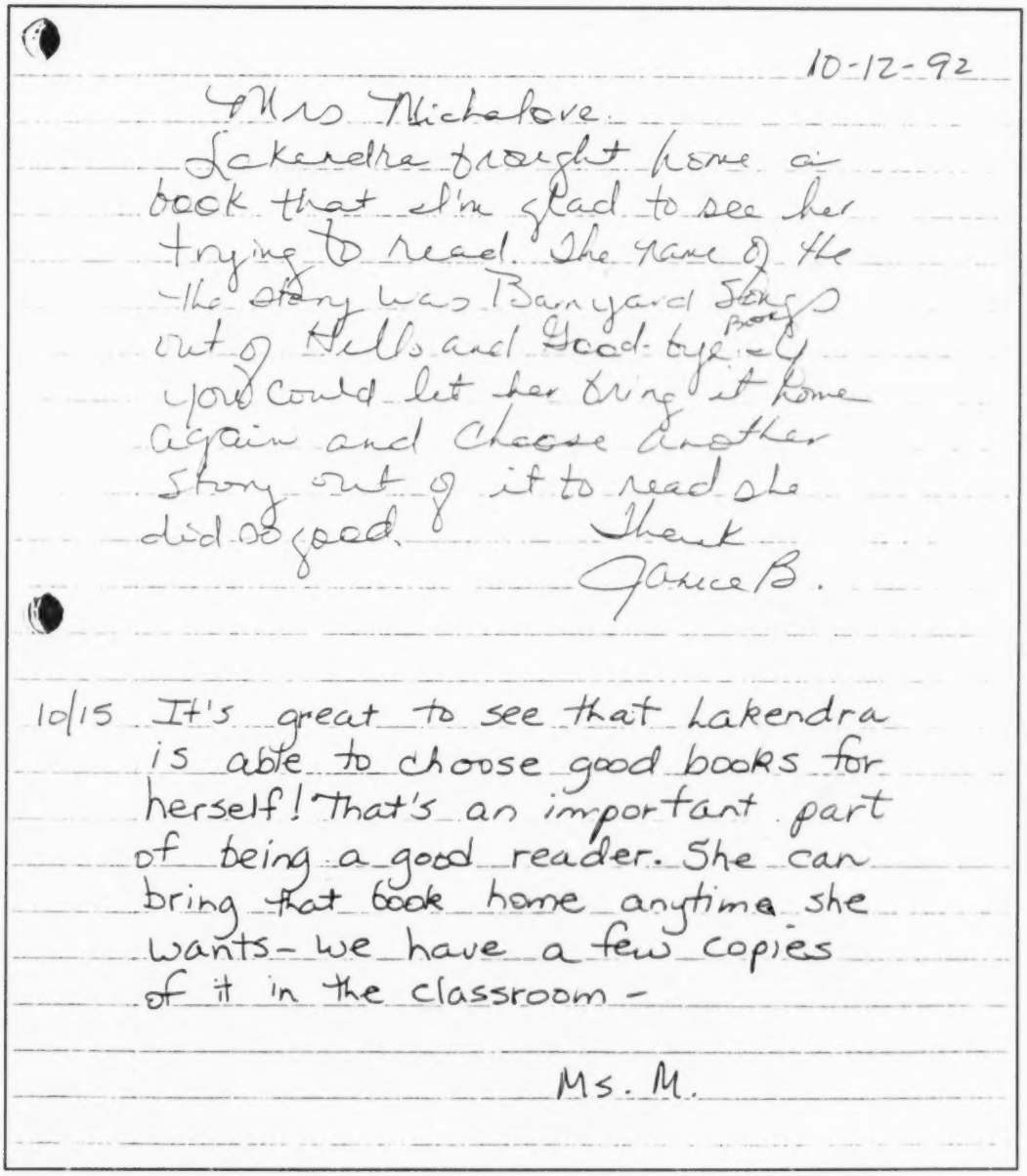
She saw her teachers as members of the community, too, and often wrote, "You are to take this Book home too."

Lakendra's most pervasive response to literature was general evaluation:

> (11-11-91) the story Rosies walk was good
> Mrs. Shockley it was good
> Mrs. Shockley it ws good
> itwsgood
> ysitwsgood

There was growth in Lakendra's responding over time, both in types of responses and in spelling, punctuation, and sentence sense. A sampling of a few second-grade responses makes this quite apparent (see Figures 5, 6, & 7).

By February of her second-grade year, Lakendra was reading more independently and with better understanding, and writing most of the responses herself. In this entry from that time, we detect both pride and a continuing watchful eye as Janice wrote:



10-12-92

Mrs Michalove.

Lakendra brought home a book that she'm glad to see her trying to read. The name of the the story was Barnyard Story out of Hells and Good-bye book you could let her bring it home again and choose another story out of it to read she did so good.

Thank

Janice B.

10/15 It's great to see that Lakendra is able to choose good books for herself! That's an important part of being a good reader. She can bring that book home anytime she wants - we have a few copies of it in the classroom -

Ms. M.

Figure 5. October 1992 Entry from Lakendra's Journal

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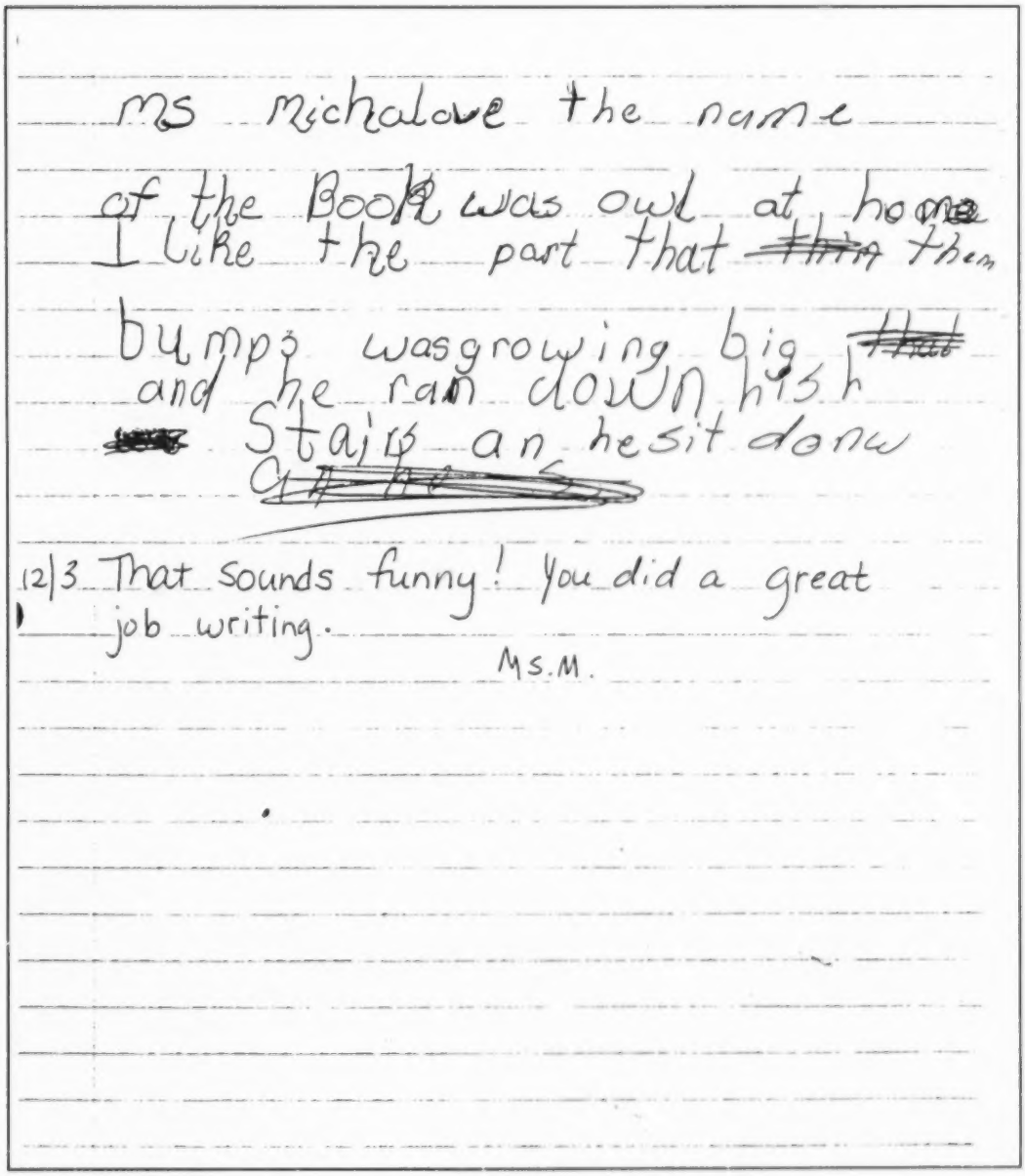
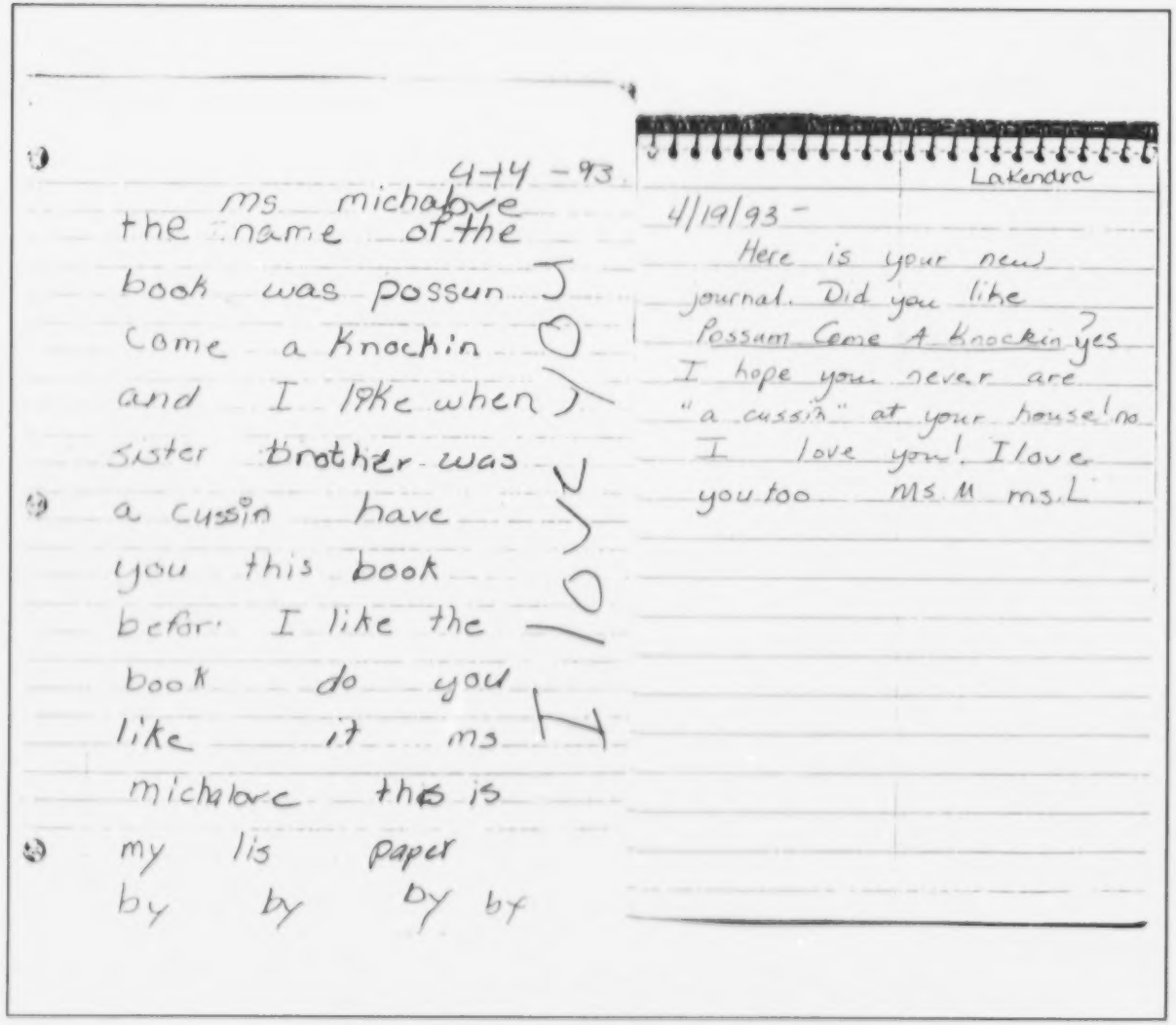

Ms Michalove the name
of the Book was owl at home
I like the part that then
bumps was growing big
and he ran down hish
Stairs an he sit down

12/3 That sounds funny! You did a great job writing.
Ms.M.

Figure 6. December 1992 Entry from Lakendra's Journal



4-4-93
ms michalove
the name of the
book was possum
come a knockin
and I like when
sister brother was
a cussin have
you this book
befor I like the
book do you
like it ms
michalove this is
my lis paper
by by by by

I love you

Lakendra

4/19/93 -
Here is your new
journal. Did you like
Possum Come A Knockin yes
I hope you never are
"a cussin" at your house! no
I love you! I love
you too ms M ms. L

Figure 7. April 1993 Entry from Lakendra's Journal

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> Ms. Michalove, Lakendra read the story of *Fox and his Friends* and she did very good with it. She's getting better and better. As you can see I can't hardly get a chance to write in the journal for Lakendra she likes to write about her stories she read. And how is she doing in Ms. Allen's [chapter 1 teacher] room? Thanks. Janice Barnett

Nurturing Relationships

Above all else, Lakendra's journal was about relationships. It highlighted a mother-daughter relationship of love, support, and challenge. It was also a vehicle for a teacher-to-teacher relationship building between the teaching at home and that at school. Both adults were openly appreciative of the other. Janice thanked Betty and Barbara with almost every entry and likewise praised the efforts of her daughter. In turn, both Betty and Barbara responded with support of both mother and daughter.

Lakendra became increasingly engaged with books and with writing over the course of 2 years. We believe one reason was that she had a way to consistently receive feedback about her literacy development from those who mattered most. Without fail, Lakendra's mother would include some kind of supportive comment about her daughter as a reader or a writer:

- as a first grader I think she's doing very good.
- Lakendra is getting along with her reading very well. In the story *Mr. Grump* she read right through it and I was very pleased.
- Lakendra did real good but she got a few words wrong. But altogether I think she is progressing very well.
- she did very well with this story with no problem her reading have improved a great deal and that makes me feel so good.
- In the story *Fox In Love*, Lakendra just wiz on through it with no problem. I think she's got reading down pack and I'm so please to see that. . . .

This continual pride Janice showed in Lakendra's progress obviously meant a great deal to this child. Lakendra reported on an interest survey that her favorite thing was "homework," and she did make significant progress as a reader and writer, both in first grade and second grade.

Janice enjoyed telling us of the times Lakendra read to other members of her family, and didn't hesitate to share the joy with us as Lakendra "impressed" her father and her grandfather with her reading.

> Lakendra read the story to her father and he was very pleased at the fact that she is in the 1st grade and reading books and doing so well. Thank you. Janice Barnett (9/25/91)

Lakendra's mom not only supported her daughter's work in this way, but she also was quick to show her appreciation for her teachers. It was almost as if we didn't know how important it was to us or how needy we were as classroom teachers for such signs of success and appreciation for our efforts until we had

someone tell us. We remained fueled and focused by her songs of praise that went something like this:

- In the story *Cookies Week* Lakendra did very good. I really enjoy this time with her reading to me it very special for me and to me. Thanks and keep up the good work.

- Lakendra reading is improving and so is her writing. I'm glad to know Fowler Drive Teacher is so good and patient with their students. Especially you. I'm glad to know I don't have to worry about Lakendra in your class.

- I am please at the progress she has made this school year. Thanks for your good work of teaching.

- Thanks for yal grrat methods of teaching.

In turn, both Betty and Barbara frequently offered supportive statements of Janice's efficacy both as a parent and a teacher.

- Janice, Lakendra is doing good with reading and writing in class too. Thanks for taking the time to listen to her read. It really makes a difference.

- She's lucky to have such a caring mom—thanks.

- Lakendra will continue to improve with your kind of help.

- a wonderful mother

All signs pointed to "journaling" as a special aspect of day-to-day literate life. We do not know if storybook readings had been a part of the family's daily routine during her preschool years, but we do know now that it was valued and sustained on a daily basis during first and second grades. In an early first-grade interest inventory, Lakendra reported that she owned 10 books. At the end of a second-grade holiday period, Janice commented that they had been missing the books and were glad to be back. This led us to believe that perhaps this homework was a way to truly build relationships with books as a primary ingredient in their family life. We believe that the level of involvement was so complete because Janice wanted to be there for her only child in an important way. She just needed an avenue of access and the respect to participate in a way that was meaningful.

Another example of this family's individuality was its contribution to our book, *Family Stories*. Instead of a narrative, members of Lakendra's family chose to list old sayings that they remembered and talked about, calling them "Short Stories."

Short Stories

1. When it's raining and the sun is still shining, the devil is beating his wife.

2. When it rains, God is crying and when it thunders, God is angry.

3. When a black cat crosses the road and goes to the left, it's bad luck, and to the right, it's good luck.

4. If you kill a frog you will stump your toe.

5. Open an umbrella in the house, it's bad luck.

We all—parents, children, and teachers—eventually shared a vision that reading and writing should be pleasurable, and that if forced or done in isolation, could become a begrudging duty. Although "homework" was a have-to, in the sense of a school assignment, we saw that for most families it sooner or later became a want-to, a valued part of family life. And everyone wanted to keep it that way.

Janice: Ms. Michalove, Lakendra read the story of *The Doorbell Rang*. She did very good with it she got a little lazy tonight and didn't didn't want to write in her journal tonight she's working on some rules for her clubhouse. Well I guess that's all for now. Thanks. Janice

Barbara: It sounds like she did her writing on her clubhouse rules—good for her. I think you're great to write in the journal for her when she's involved in other writing that is important to her. Thanks. Barbara M.

It was clear that Janice saw herself as teacher. She decided that a primary purpose of the "journaling" process was to inform—parent informing teacher and teacher informing parent. They provided one another with general evaluation about Lakendra's reading progress and specific insights (such as singing as memorizing or real reading, and comprehension concerns).

Despite Janice's obvious support of her daughter and her daughter's teacher, she did not show her involvement by any kind of physical presence at the school. In fact, we continue to be haunted by the belief that in any kind of school-wide parent involvement program, Janice might have been discounted as a parent who did not care about the schooling of her daughter, simply because she did not attend school-sponsored events. The parallel practices engaged Janice in a way that was personally meaningful, accessible, and of obvious importance to her daughter.

As her final entry at the end of first grade, Janice reflected:

> Ms. Shockley, Lakendra read me the story of the *Hermit Crab* and we both enjoyed it she wanted me to write in her journal for the last time. I really think that student journal is a great way for the parents and teachers to communicate with each other this makes me feel like I am writing or saying good-bye for the last time. I really enjoyed it. Thanks. Janice B.

We would like to say again, thanks to you, Janice and Lakendra, for sharing and caring so much. We have adopted your phrase: "and as always [we were] pleased."

Engaging Families

So who were these families? Were they all like Lakendra's? If all these families got so involved, was this a private school? A highly

educated, middle-class suburban school? A school where the parents had time and resources to spare? One evening at a parent meeting, we asked the five African-American and four European-American parents in attendance to provide us with a description of the school. We write about it frequently and are often asked to describe this population. We were tired of and somewhat uncomfortable with the usual percentage descriptors of Black and White families, free lunch, parental schooling, and so forth.

Parents wrote for a few minutes and then shared their descriptions. Their perceptions did not have anything to do with percentages. They described their school as "an extended family," "progressive," "a neighborhood learning center," where "parents are welcome" and there is "rapport between teachers and administration." They described the families who attend as "parents who are really, really trying to do our best—even if it means doing laundry at 9:00 and the kid's sitting on the dryer reading to me," "many single-parent families," "poor to middle class," with "everybody pulled in a lot of different directions." The most common descriptor of both school and families was "CARING." One parent even commented, "I don't see this school by race or anything but as a whole community working to make this school the best." Were these exceptional families? Yes. But aren't all families? Were they all alike? No, just like their children, they were all unique and celebrated learning with us in their own special ways.

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NRRC National Reading Research Center

318 Aderhold, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602-7125
3216 J. M. Patterson Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742

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